

From 'me' to 'we'

Action for Happiness is on a mission to reframe our ideas around personal contentment. Dr Mark Williamson and Vanessa King explain why

Writing

Matt Packer

Photography

Julian Dodd


Any social movement takes flight from a series of catalysts – those electric moments when like-minds meet and mutual enthusiasm flows. Action for Happiness, which launched in 2011, is no exception. For director and chief executive Dr Mark Williamson, the journey towards his own catalyst began with a bout of debilitating, stress-induced back pain towards the end of a long spell in corporate life, during which he developed technologies for Hewlett-Packard and Accenture. After seeking solace in an MBA, he came to realise that he “wasn’t really interested in selling anyone anything”. So, he moved into raising awareness of climate change as director of innovation at The Carbon Trust.

“During that time,” he recalls, “I read *Happiness: Lessons From a New Science* by Richard Layard, who’s one of our co-founders. His work calls for us to measure progress in terms of human happiness and wellbeing – not just economic growth. It made me see that the way to address environmental issues wasn’t about the technologies I was working on. It was more to do with shifting cultural narrative, which says that success is about earning, having and consuming more. By chasing that false promise, we’re not just breaking the planet – we’re breaking ourselves. And I had an awakening that we have to reframe success as a more authentic happiness. Not

just for individuals, but collectively. And that’s now our mission: to shift our culture.” Williamson met with Layard and other thinkers with similar views, and the movement’s nucleus began to take shape.

Vanessa King, now Action for Happiness’s psychology expert and workplace lead, had her own catalyst. After studying psychology and biology, she trained as a tax accountant before moving into the strategy unit at Coopers & Lybrand (which later became PwC), where she focused on helping clients with their people issues. A couple of roles later, King was consulting in change, leadership development and talent management at human resources firm Towers Perrin – now Willis Towers Watson – but was growing steadily disillusioned.

“Of course succession planning is important,” she says. “But talent management back then was primarily about spotting the top 10% or 15% of staff that an organisation thinks will make it to the top. And I was getting increasingly uncomfortable, thinking: does that mean the bottom 85% or 90% are talentless? Surely, if we could release more of their potential, that would make a huge difference – not just to the organisation, but to their lives.”

At the 2008 World Congress on Leadership Development, King heard a speaker talk about the new ‘science of strengths’, focusing on what’s right about people, rather than weaknesses. “It was a lightbulb moment for me,” she says. “So I googled it, and found you could study a Masters in this stuff at the University of Pennsylvania.” 

WE HAVE
TO REFRAME
SUCCESS
AS A MORE
AUTHENTIC
HAPPINESS



LEADERSHIP LESSONS: DR MARK WILLIAMSON

Who has been your most important real-life leadership inspiration?

“Professor Lord Richard Layard. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve met up with him of an evening, and he’s had to leave to vote in the House of Lords on some obscure, but important, mental health policy. He works incredibly hard on the stuff he believes in.”

What does a good leader look like?

“I like the idea of servant leadership – leading by trying to help the people who are following you.”

What’s your greatest challenge?

“My horrific back pain problem was a real wake-up call. For the first time

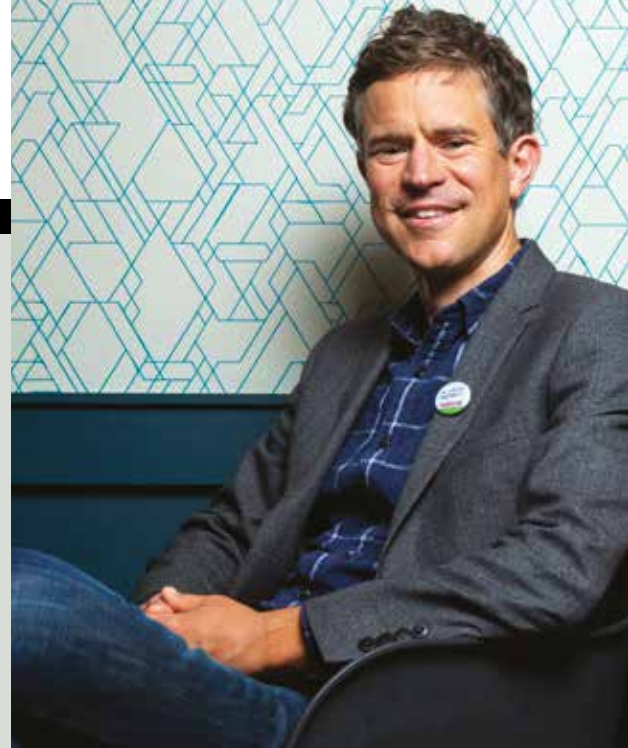
in my life, I was willing to take off my mask and say, ‘I’m struggling right now,’ and then to find ways of dealing with that.”

What’s the most important leadership lesson that you’ve ever learned?

“How to say no to demands on my time with tact and compassion. It transformed my ability to prioritise.”

What’s the secret to your own success?

“Mindful living. Bringing mindfulness out of the context of eyes-closed meditation and into the way I live has had a massive impact.”

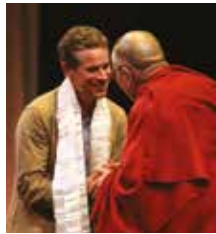


King duly enrolled on the university’s Master of Applied Positive Psychology course and spent the next two years shuttling back and forth between the UK and US. At the end of it, she had an opportunity to present her dissertation at the first-ever Positive Psychology conference in China. On the flight, she found herself sitting next to Action for Happiness co-founder Sir Anthony Seldon, who invited her to meet Williamson. “So I did, and Mark said, ‘Can you help us out with the psychological research and advise us on what evidence-based actions we should encourage people to take?’ And here we are, almost ten years later.”

Coping with reality

Why is there a need for us to take action on happiness in today’s world? “If you look at reported levels of wellbeing, we are in many ways blessed relative to previous generations, in terms of technology and health advances and so on,” says Williamson. “Yet, as we look around, we see so much stress, loneliness and isolation – factors that are causing a breakdown of mental health, families and communities. This is all really worrying. But now we have a base of empirical science that helps us to properly understand what makes for a happy life.”

He continues: “I want to make it clear that, in talking about happiness, we’re not referring to some glib, smiley-happy, everything’s-fine-all-the-time illusory state. This is about how to help people get the most out of life – and to cope with the reality of the human condition, which is that we all experience sadness, anger, loss and fear. Leading a happier life means responding construc-



ACTION FOR HAPPINESS FACTS

Launched

2011

Co-founders

Lord Richard Layard, professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science; Sir Anthony Seldon, leading educationalist and political historian; and Geoff Mulgan CBE, chief executive of innovation foundation Nesta; Dr Mark Williamson

Patron

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama (pictured above with Williamson)

Reach

180 countries

Active membership

151,000

Twitter following

163,000

tively to whatever happens to us, and being able to thrive in spite of the problems we face – whether these occur at work, in our family lives, or in our communities. So our mission is to contribute to, and to help create, a happier world.”

“It’s important to address the impact our psychological state has on others,” notes King. “If we’re languishing inside – if we are unhappy or overloaded for prolonged periods – that not only affects our physical health, but can ripple out towards other people. We know that if we’re lacking in sleep, we’re more likely to snap at others, be rude, or not notice people. And that’s just one factor. So there’s a responsibility to take care of our own wellbeing, because it’s not just for us. It enables us to contribute to other people’s lives.”

The Action for Happiness movement – a registered charity – has three primary initiatives for carrying out its mission to bring happiness beyond the realm of theory and into people’s everyday lives:

■ **Exploring What Matters** Action for Happiness has thousands of community volunteers up and down the country. They are trained to run an eight-week course on topics such as maintaining good relationships, dealing with stress and defining purpose. People can donate as much or as little as they wish, and many participants find the experience life-changing.

■ **Building management and leadership capability** Under King’s leadership, the movement goes into workplaces to support practical application of the science of happiness. It visits large corporates, technology firms, charities and public-sector bodies.



LEADERSHIP LESSONS: VANESSA KING

Who has been your most important real-life leadership inspiration?

“Mark. He practises what he preaches. He’s taken on board the science that we’re sharing with other people, and implemented it in his own life. He’s super-busy and super-productive, but pays high-quality attention to others. He’s a great example of walking the talk.”

What does a good leader look like?

“Someone who is authentic – who is unafraid to share worries or concerns, and who puts people first.”

What’s your greatest challenge?

“Trying to juggle all the different stuff that’s going on all the time – especially

as wellbeing science grows. What are our priorities? Where can we make the greatest difference?”

What’s the most important leadership lesson that you’ve ever learned?

“Be unafraid to change direction – even when people around you may think you’re mad. If you know what feels right for you, go for it.”

What’s been the secret to your own success?

“Saying yes to new opportunities that sound interesting, even if you don’t know where they will lead. It can’t all be planned out.”

■ **Regular nudges** Action for Happiness’s ever-expanding network of volunteers, learners and supporters is kept mindful of the movement’s ethos via a series of themed online calendars, which mark each day with a thought-provoking tip. In the resilience-themed month of ‘Jump-back July’, one daily tip was: “Adopt a growth mindset. Change ‘I can’t’ into ‘I can’t yet’.”

The keys to happier living

In addition to the donations it receives from delivering local Exploring What Matters courses and the income it generates from its work with organisations, Action for Happiness is sustained by its Supporters’ Circle. Williamson describes this circle as “a philanthropically-minded group of strategic advisers – people who really care about mental health and want to help change our culture”.

The movement also has its own manual, penned by King, called *10 Keys to Happier Living*. “It’s probably the most evidence-based book around on how to be happier and create happiness for others,” Williamson explains. “There are hundreds of scientific findings in there, but they’re written in a really accessible way. People in our network have used it in all sorts of different contexts: organisations, schools, communities.”

The ten keys are presented as a menu, rather than a prescription. “If you take their initials in order, they spell out the acronym GREAT DREAM, and the first two letters stand for Giving and Relationships,” says King. “It was really important for me to ensure we built in that meaning: one fifth of our framework is devoted to other people.”

ONE OF THE BIGGEST PRESSURES OF MODERN LIFE IS SELF- COMPARISON

Compassion and the Dalai Lama

Then there is compassion, which is fundamental to the movement’s mission: “One of the biggest pressures of modern life is self-comparison, which has been heightened by social media,” says King. “Even people who reach – by any objective standard – some sort of material success or status, still don’t feel like they are ‘good enough’. We hear about that all the time. So, part of our work is helping people to be more compassionate towards themselves.”

Someone else who is clear about the link between compassion and happiness is His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He argues that by striving to become more compassionate towards others, we increase our own serenity and inner strength. Significantly, the Dalai Lama is involved with Action for Happiness at an organisational level.

“He’s our patron,” Williamson explains. “We have no religious, commercial or political affiliations. Our movement is a secular, non-commercial way of looking at the world. So the Dalai Lama isn’t there because of his link to Buddhism or his former role as a political figurehead. He’s there because he stands for the same thing as the movement, which is a universal idea that happiness matters – and crucially, that perhaps the best way to reach happiness is by bringing happiness to others.”

As he puts it: “At the heart of Action for Happiness is the notion that we’re at our happiest not when we’re caring for ourselves, but when we care for each other. It’s a path from ‘happier me’ to ‘happier we’.” ■

Matt Packer is a freelance writer and editor. Follow him on Twitter at @mjpwriter

For more on happiness, see Spotlight, starting on page 27